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Selfhood beyond the Species Boundary

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A review of Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2013.

Growing out of fieldwork conducted in the forests around Ávila, a Quichua-speaking Runa village in Ecuador's Upper Amazon region, Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* participates in what might be called the "ontological turn" in recent anthropological research. This turn calls for the comparative study of the various ontologies projected by different cultures, past and present. At issue are more or less widely shared understandings of the kinds of beings that populate the world, the qualities and abilities those beings are taken to embody (including the capacity to have perspectives on events, among other attributes linked to selfhood), and how the beings included in various categories and subcategories relate to those categorized as human.¹ Coming to terms with differences among such categorization systems has far-reaching implications not only for anthropology but also for other areas of inquiry concerned with how systems of this sort shape various institutions and practices; pertinent fields of research include the history of agriculture, animal ethics, and the sociology of companion animals in families. Cultural ontologies also bear saliently on the study of literary and other narratives that feature the perspectives and experiences of nonhuman animals, or that more or less explicitly situate human characters in wider, trans-species constellations of agents.²

In his introduction, Kohn suggests that "an ethnographic focus not just on humans or only on animals but also on how humans and animals relate breaks open the circular closure that otherwise confines us when we seek to understand the distinctively human by means of that which is distinctive to humans"—for example, via sociocultural anthropology with its emphasis on language, culture, society, and history (6).³ Although he connects his approach to other research on human-nonhuman relationships, including Bruno Latour's use of actor-network analysis to explore the hybrid formations that link humans with various artifacts and instruments and also Jane Bennett's Deleuze-inspired account of the agency of matter, Kohn objects to the way some of this work flattens out "important distinctions between humans and other kinds of beings, as well as those between selves and objects" (7). Accordingly, he gravitates toward "Donna Haraway's conviction that there is something about our everyday engagements with other kinds of creatures that can open new kinds of possibilities for relating and understanding" (Kohn 7). In the discussion of *runa puma*, or "were-jaguars," that opens the book, Kohn comments,

How other kinds of beings see us matters. That other kinds of beings see us changes things. If jaguars also represent us—in ways that can matter vitally to us—then anthropology cannot limit itself just to exploring how people from different societies might happen to represent them as doing so. Such encounters with other kinds of beings force us to recognize the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.

(1)

Kohn's other key conceptual resources include monistic models that resist dichotomizing culture and nature, and that thereby offset dualistic anthropological paradigms "in which humans are portrayed as separate from the worlds they represent" (9), along with Charles Saunders Peirce's semiotic system and Terrence W. Deacon's more recent use of Peirce's ideas to explore emergent phenomena in the domain of biology.

In the book's first chapter, "The Open Whole," Kohn combines his emphases on monism and on semiotics to map out what he terms the "ecology of selves," human as well as nonhuman, within which the human inhabitants of Ávila situate themselves. Kohn proposes the concept of "amplification" to distinguish forest settings from other places where the multifarious ecology of selves might be less evident, arguing that immersion in the especially "dense ecology [of the Amazonian forest] amplifies and makes visible a larger semiotic field beyond that which is exceptionally human" (49). He then goes on to explore how anthropology might be reoriented around the assumption that life itself is constitutively semiotic. In Kohn's account, which builds on Peirce's triadic model of the sign as well as Deacon's use of Peirce for biosemiotic purposes, this reorientation roots human making-making practices within "more pervasive semiotic logics" (50), suggesting how iconic, indexical, and symbolic sign processes are nested within each other.

For example, the indexical relationship between a loud sound in the forest and its potentially dangerous cause involves something more than iconicity, or semiotic relationships that turn on modes of resemblance. Specifically, indexicality "emerges as a result of a complex hierarchical set of associations among icons. The logical relationship between icons and indices is unidirectional. Indices are the products of a special layered relation among icons but not the other way around" (Kohn 52). In the instance of a crashing tree in the forest signifying danger, an index emerges⁴ from iconic associations, since the danger is not immediately present to interpretants—to use Peirce's term for interpreters of semiotic relationships whose interpretations extend the process of semiosis forward in time and outward in space. In turn, just as indices are the product of relations among icons, symbols—signs that (like linguistic signs) signify by way of social conventions—are the product of relations among indices. And this relationship is unidirectional as well: "in symbolic reference the indexical relation of word to object becomes subordinate to the indexical relation of word to word in a system of such words" (Kohn 53). Drawing on Deacon's account of emergence and emergent properties, Kohn asserts that "symbolic reference, that which makes humans unique, is an emergent dynamic that is

nested within this broader semiosis of life from which it stems and on which it depends" (55).⁵ Although Kohn's larger claim here is anti-anthropocentric, and rests on the premise that humans cannot be separated from the semiotic dynamics of living processes more generally, it should be noted that research on the complex communicative behaviors of nonhuman primates and also of cetaceans such as whales and dolphins calls into question Kohn's assumption that symbolic reference is an exclusively human endowment (Marino 28).

In any case, Kohn's subsequent chapters explore ontological consequences of the extension of semiotic processes across the species boundary. In chapter 2, "The Living Thought," Kohn argues that "all experiences...for all selves, are semiotically mediated," such that "introspection, human-to-human intersubjectivity, and even trans-species sympathy and communication are not categorically different" (87). This claim explains Kohn's objection to the varieties of posthumanism found in Latour's and Bennett's work, for example. Such approaches to nonhuman agency fail to register "that some nonhumans, namely, those that are alive, are selves" (91), thereby reinstating a form of dualism that Kohn, like Peirce before him, seeks to move beyond. In chapter 3, "Soul Blindness," Kohn investigates how hunting and predation impinge on ecologies of selves. He notes a paradox at work in this connection: many social practices among the Ávila Runa center on the sharing of meat, yet hunting and eating animals entails transforming beings whom the Runa recognize as selves or subjects into consumable objects. Another, related paradox arises insofar as successful hunting, and hence the transformation of animals into food objects, requires being able to adopt those animals' perspectives. If the hunter cannot see the world in the way that another kind of self sees it, then the hunter has been stricken with "soul blindness," rendered unable to differentiate prey animals from their surrounding environment (Kohn 117). Nevertheless, predation results in the loss of selfhood for nonhuman agents. Kohn's fourth chapter, "Trans-species Pidgins," explores how the people of Ávila negotiate paradoxes of the sort discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, to avoid the isolating effects of soul blindness, the human inhabitants of Ávila must remain receptive to the viewpoints of other kinds of beings, but without losing their own species identity. As Kohn puts it, "there is a constant tension...between the blurring of interspecies boundaries and maintaining difference, and the challenge is to find the semiotic means to productively sustain this tension without being pulled to either extreme" (140). Focusing on human-canine interactions in Ávila, Kohn describes how the people of Ávila use a number of communicative strategies to walk the tightrope between being blind to other souls and metamorphosing willy-nilly into other kinds of beings. These strategies include addressing dogs in the third person and employing what Kohn describes as a "trans-species pidgin," which blends human and nonhuman modes of expression. The pidgin in question features Quichua grammar, syntax, and lexis but also uninflected and reduplicated forms (e.g. *hua hua* and *tiu tiu*) that are used to quote dogs barking—these forms not being fully integrated into human grammar.

Chapters 5 and 6, "Form's Effortless Efficacy" and "The Living Future (and the Imponderable Weight of the Dead)," broaden Kohn's investigative focus, exploring how the ecology of selves in and around Ávila is shaped by issues of power and embedded within a larger timespan extending backward into the past and forward into the future. Chapter 5 considers how constraints on the distribution of Amazonian biotic resources in turn constrain colonial and postcolonial power relations in which the Ávila Runa are enmeshed, even as those power relations shape how the people of Ávila understand their place within a trans-species ecology of selves. Thus, according to Runa tradition, the dead become jaguars in the afterlife; but those jaguars assume the role of dogs vis-à-vis white spirit masters who, patterned after the Spanish colonizers of the past, control the realm of the dead. In chapter 6, Kohn writes that, "[s]elves, human or nonhuman, simple or complex, are waypoints in a semiotic process. They are outcomes of semiosis as well as the starting points for new sign interpretation whose outcome will be a future self" (206). Yet the question of how to ensure the self's continuity into the future remains. Arguing that the Runa use shamanic techniques to "extend a paw into the future in order to bring some of that future back to the realm of the living" (214), Kohn suggests that these techniques are shaped by the hierarchical power relationships of a colonial past. In other words, without this "colonially inflected predatory hierarchy that structures the ecology of selves," there would be no higher shamanic position from which to reassess one's own position in a more-than-human world (Kohn 214).

As Kohn remarks, ethnographic research on other cultures often results in a defamiliarization of the institutions and practices of the ethnographer's own culture. Kohn's most defamiliarizing discoveries arguably center on the ecology of selves he has found among the Ávila Runa. By putting his readers into dialogue with the trans-species community of Ávila, Kohn enables them to rethink assumptions about what constitutes a self, and also about what sorts of relationships and responsibilities humans have vis-à-vis other, nonhuman selves. In this respect, Kohn builds on Haraway's characterization of the multispecies encounter as an important domain for cultivating ethical practice; as such encounters reveal, "many of the selves who are not ourselves are also not human," with those nonhuman selves thus embodying a "significant otherness" that forces "us to find new ways to listen...[and] to think beyond our moral worlds" (Kohn 134). More generally, in mapping out a different cultural ontology, *How Forests Think* gives shape to important questions about the scope and limitations of our own. What would it be like to live in a world no longer defined by a restrictive ontology that curtails and obscures humans' relational ties to a wide range of relevant others? What changes—conceptual, institutional, ethical, juridical, and political—would result from moving to a more inclusive ecology of selves, that is, from parsimonious to prolific allocations of the possibility for selfhood beyond the human? What mutations in the very concept of selfhood might be catalyzed by a rejection of anthropocentric geographies of the self, which assign humans a position above other forms of creatural life while gapping out experiences located below the imaginary elevation of the human? In other words, what forms of relatedness are made possible by an expanded ecology of selves, and how are these transhuman networks of affiliation figured in imaginative literature, the storyworlds of cinema, narratives for children, and other domains? How might the study of such domains, and the widened communities of selves they accommodate, lead to a rethinking of our culture's fundamental assumptions, values, and practices?

1. In Matei Candea's account of this turn, "the late 19th-century shift from singular capitalized Culture to the multiplicity of cultures, and the shift from the single Ontology of philosophy to an anthropology of ontologies can therefore be seen as analogous moves—they both serve to inscribe difference at the heart of the anthropological project. Not, of course, an exclusive, oppressive difference but a relational, productive difference...." (175). Similarly, Philippe Descola argues that, "for anthropology, no ontology is better or more truthful in itself than another.... [At issue are] schemes of coding and parceling out phenomenal reality by means of which [people] have learned to couch and transmit their experience of things, schemes issuing from historical choices that privileged, at a given time and place, certain sets of relations to humans and non-humans, in such a way as to allow for the combination of these relationships into sui generis ensembles—already constituted before the birth of the individuals that actualize them—to be experienced as naturally coherent" (66-7).

2. *How Forests Think* thus provides important foundations for what can be described as a "narratology beyond the human"—that is, a framework for narrative analysis that explores how ideas developed by scholars of story bear on questions about human-animal relationships in the larger biosphere, and vice versa (Herman n.p.).

3. For an early anticipation of this attempt to reconfigure anthropology as the study of human communities in relation to the broader biotic communities of which they are a part, see the work of Tim Ingold. As Ingold puts it, "an adequate integration of anthropology within the wider field of biology requires that the study of persons be subsumed under the study of organisms....The most urgent task for contemporary anthropology is to...re-embed the human subject within the continuum of organic life" (224). Relatedly, noting that in a previous elaboration of his approach he used the locution "anthropology of life," Kohn asserts that "the current iteration is closely related to that approach except that here I am less interested in the anthropological treatment of a subject matter (an anthropology of x) and more in an analytic that can take us beyond our subject matter ('the human') without abandoning it" (229 n.6; see also Kohn, "Dogs").

4. Here Kohn follows Deacon in using the terms *emerge* and *emergence* in a technical sense, involving the supervenience of higher-order structures or properties on sets of elements that do not exhibit those structures or properties when taken individually—as in the case of mob behavior emerging from a collocation of individual persons. As Andy Clark notes, however, two different concepts of emergence are sometimes conflated in accounts of this (controversial) phenomenon. One of the concepts holds that "there is emergence whenever interesting, non-centrally-controlled behavior ensues as a result of the interactions of multiple simple components within a system" (Clark 108); the other concept "foregrounds the notion of interactions between behavior systems and local environmental structure" (Clark 109). Both concepts, arguably, are operative in Kohn's discussion of what he terms the semiosis of life.

5. See Kohn's concluding statement in the book's Epilogue, entitled "Beyond": "Throughout this book I have sought ways to account for difference and novelty despite continuity. *Emergence* is a technical term I used to trace linkages across disjuncture; *beyond* is a broader, more general, one. That beyond human language lies semiosis reminds us that language is connected to the semiosis of the living world, which extends beyond it. That there are selves beyond the human draws attention to the fact that some of the attributes of our human selfhood are continuous with theirs. That there is death beyond every life gestures toward the ways we might continue, thanks to the spaces opened up by all the absent dead who make us what we are" (226).

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